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ABSTRACT

The genocide in Rwanda has resulted in that country having many child-headed households. This unusual phenomenon has set Rwanda apart from its neighboring countries. This book of photographic portraits and stories of Rwandan children and adolescents in families living without adult support or supervision conveys the complexity and diversity of their situations and their determination to remain together as siblings. The book is designed to use photography and writing to influence public policy affecting the lives of those living in marginalized communities. The book's introduction presents the purpose of this project as documenting the current situation of parentless children in Rwanda and their heroic efforts to rebuild the foundations of their families. A series of photographic and narrative portraits follows, describing how the children lost their parents, their views of family, their feelings of responsibility for siblings, and their efforts to support their families. (KB)

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No Home Without Foundation:
A Portrait of Child-headed Households in Rwanda

Introduction

Children who experience loss and separation are more vulnerable to neglect, abuse, and exploitation than children who retain a traditional network of adult support. "Child-headed households" present an increasing social problem in the regions of southern and central Africa, where the primary etiology is the HIV-AIDS pandemic. In Rwanda, however, the extent of this phenomenon and particularly its origins in genocide set it apart from neighboring countries such as Uganda, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Malawi, all of which are confronted by the predicament of families of children who live without adult support or supervision.

"Nta Nzu Itagira Inkigi" ("No Home Without Foundation") conveys the heroic commitment and self-sacrifice these children show for one another, and testifies to their fortitude in the face of overwhelming responsibility. These portraits and stories convey the complexity and diversity of the children's situations, along with their powerful determination to remain together as siblings. All too often following separation from adult caretakers, siblings are subject to arbitrary separation from each other. They are sent to orphanages, taken in as domestic help, or simply left to make a life on the streets.

"No Home Without Foundation" presents us with a profound challenge. While these stories and photographs make it less likely that practitioners and policy makers will lose sight of child-headed households in the fog bank of "vulnerables," no solutions are posed. The reader is left to struggle with what can be done in response. Local communities, government ministries, United Nations agencies, donor governments, and both local and international nongovernmental organizations are confronted every day with these complex ironies and ambiguities. Any long-term, effective response to the phenomenon of child-headed households must combine attention to immediate needs with a vision and commitment to addressing the laws and policy issues that impinge directly on these children's future—such as access to education, property rights, land tenure, adoption, and fostering.

Noah Hendler's photographs and Craig Cohen's writing do not focus on detailed facts and figures and do not exude sympathy. Rather, with integrity, the pair struggles to empathize, to portray these children as more than victims of circumstance who need to be "helped." Their work reminds us that vulnerable children are willful actors whose strengths, capacities, and actions must be an essential component of any meaningful response to their condition.

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We would like to thank Mary Diaz of the Women's Commission. We would also like to express our gratitude toward Brigette De Lay—without her enthusiasm and encouragement, none of this work would have been possible.

Special thanks to our families, for their continuing love and support.

— Craig Cohen and Noah Hendler, December 1997

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"... my father would be proud of me because my family is in a good state. I have kept them together."

These children are some of the strongest people we have ever met. We were introduced to Albert Uwamahoro* in January, 1997 outside his home, one hour southwest of Rwanda's capital, Kigali. The eighteen-year-old boy was caring for four siblings, and when he invited us inside, we were greeted by a photograph on the wall of a bushy-haired man with burning eyes.

Most of the homes we visited had pictures on the walls, some from faded newspapers and color magazines, hung at an angle, edges peeling away. Other homes had photographs of people unknown to the children, hung for decoration, not memory. The photograph hanging on Uwamahoro's wall was a memory. It was his father, killed during the genocide.

During our ten weeks working with child-headed households in Rwanda, we did not focus on the genocide, but rather, we sought to document the current situation of one vulnerable group of children. Part of this process involved teaching the children to make their own photographs with plastic cameras (four of these pictures appear on the inside back cover). Returning these photographs to the children became one of the most rewarding parts of our work.

On the day Uwamahoro received the photographs he had made, his brothers, sisters, and their friends crowded around him, all searching for their faces. Most were not disappointed, because all but one of the fifteen photographs were of children. As Uwamahoro slowly flipped through the images, his patience seemed out of place among the jostling of his siblings and their friends—his ease almost awkward among the pressing children.

Uwamahoro immediately announced that the lone photograph of an adult, his uncle, was his favorite. "I visit my uncle whenever I am lonely," he said, "but I never spend the night, because I have to return to my own family." Uwamahoro said that this photograph did not belong with pictures of children, but belonged with the ones he kept of his family from before the war. He stood and walked toward his house.

Uwamahoro returned with a set of his parents' photographs, mostly pictures of his father. As Uwamahoro shared these with us, we were confronted with what it means to eliminate a family from time. Uwamahoro said, "When I look at these photographs of my father, I think first how I was not with him right before he was murdered."

Uwamahoro told us that he looks at the photographs of his parents before he goes to sleep at night, and that he liked the photograph of his uncle because it resembled his father. He put the photograph into the plastic bag with the pictures of his parents. Uwamahoro was silent for a moment, surrounded by the talking and laughing of his siblings and their friends, weighing past and future, and his role in between. "The other thing I think of," he said, "is that my father would be proud of me because my family is in a good state. I have kept them together." And with that, he removed the picture of his uncle from the bag. He had changed his mind. "This photograph belongs to my uncle," he said.

When we look back on our interviews and photographs of these children, we are reminded of the Rwandan proverb, *Nta nzu itagira inkingi*, *No home without foundation*. We are reminded of what existed at one time for these children, of the horrors that then befell them, and of what is now missing. Their daily struggles and successes show us that there are ways to remember genocide that are not limited to the dead, to the past, to memory. As these children become adults, they are learning what kind of world they wish to create for their younger siblings and, one day, their own children. They are learning to rebuild a foundation of their own.

* Children's names have been changed.

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"I am not an adult, but I am a father. I provide for my family. I know I have a family because a family is a group of people who are in some way united."

1

Inda ni akaruta umwana. The stomach is preferred to the child, hunger makes you selfish to the point of letting your own child perish, a Rwandan proverb.

Jean Mureramanzi walks along a dirt road, the sun and his field at his back, the darkening hills ahead. His feet are dragging—perhaps tired, hesitant—and the dust forms a soft orange cloud in the dimming light. Mureramanzi is making his way toward his home in Butare, in Rwanda's south.

Up ahead in his small mud-brick house, a boy and girl, six and nine years old, roll a ball made from plastic bags back and forth over a dirt floor. Mureramanzi pauses before entering his house, knowing that tonight there is not enough food for the entire family to eat. Normally he can find a day's work, but today his search has proved as fruitless as his field. Mureramanzi's hands are empty and his mind is full. Tonight, he must determine to which edge of desire to cling—hunger or love.

Mureramanzi is 20 years old, and he is not the father of the two young children who stop playing when he opens the door to the fading light. He is their brother. The family of children have lived alone since their parents were killed during Rwanda's genocide in 1994. At that time, Mureramanzi had not been prepared to lead a family. He had dropped out of primary school in 1991, because, he says with a smile, "I am not intelligent." Now, on his way to prepare dinner, he walks by his sister, kicks her the ball, thinks of his friends who are finishing their nightly game of football. He thinks of the decision he must make tonight, the decision which no parent should have to make. Is the stomach preferred to the child?

It is a difficult question to answer without first asking, who is the child? Mureramanzi says, "I am not an adult, and I am not a child. In the middle. I can do the work of men, but I never discuss things with them. The only adult I speak with is my grandmother, but she is worn down. I am not an adult," he says, "but I am a father. I provide for my family. I know I have a family because a family is a group of people who are in some way united."

Tonight, as a father, Mureramanzi sacrifices hunger for love and passes his portion of beans on to his brother and sister. When he lies down to sleep later that night, the taste of dust from the road is still in his mouth. He is smiling. Lying in bed, there are certain things he tries not to think of. Other things take no effort—they are never thought about. "I never think about getting married," he says, "because life in the present is much too difficult. I never think about abandoning my brother and sister," he says, "because even if I had to feed only myself, life would not be easier." These are things of which he does not think, and he is smiling. "I am happiest like tonight," he says, "when my brother and sister have what they need."

It is late now, and his siblings are sleeping, and the dark and quiet create a feeling of emptiness. "It is rare," he says, "that I feel lonely," and he turns away from the bars of the window that keep out the night.

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"It's more difficult now than when my mother was sick because before she might have recovered, but now I know I'm all alone."

The crying melodies of Theogene Nushemor, 15 years old, take flight from his hill-top home into Byumba's darkness. Tonight he is singing, "When I am Tired," learned in church, his voice lifting slightly on the line, "God does not forget the old, the sick, and the dead." And what of the young? Can they be forgotten? Can they forget?

Nushemor's father died before the boy could walk. In September, 1996, his mother died from illness after four months of traditional medical care. Nushemor says that he does not often think of his parents during the day, but at night, in his bed, he sings, and once-forgotten images push their way into his song. Images of his mothers cooking, images of her gifts of life. His singing has now stopped, he is asleep, and his song echoes in the ears of his four-year-old cousin lying next to him.

Nushemor wakes the next morning, angry, sick again. "Who is going to cultivate today?" he asks. "When my mother became sick, I stopped school. How could I go? I was the only one who could cultivate, who could keep her alive. Now that I'm the one who's sick..." He stops speaking, and watches his cousin crouch beside him in the dirt. "She cries because she is scared of people," Nushemor says, and then: "She doesn't give me much pleasure, but I'm glad she's here, because otherwise I'd be alone. It's more difficult now than when my mother was sick because before she might have recovered, but now I know I'm all alone." He looks at his cousin, seems to count her years in his head, and says that she will not go to school when she gets older because she will need to help with the daily tasks. Tasks which he knows already this morning, the sun barely crowning the opposite hills, will not get done.

"Even if I could cultivate today," Nushemor says, "my field never produces much of anything. It is large enough, but I think it needs fertilizer." He has never been taught how to farm. He has learned from watching adults in neighboring fields, always keeping his distance. They, as well, seem content to keep their distance. For the most part, only children make their way to his home. "Relatives visit every month or so, neighbors even less," he says. "It is no problem. I feel more comfortable with children. When I play with my friends, I forget."

Nushemor says, "I think more of the future than the past, especially what would happen if I became sick like my mother." He cocks his head slightly and looks down at his cousin. "Maybe my relatives will help," he says. "Maybe my neighbors will help. Maybe there are others who will help." They are words, however, uttered in the shaky voice of a child who cries while he sings, of a leader who knows that no one is following. *A society that does not respect its leaders is headed for disaster; there falls a misery that remains day and night on the hill with no elder. Agasozi dategwa umukuru kugwa ho inshyano likihirwa likarara.*

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"To me, a family is a group of people who care for each other when they are hungry or sick. I have a family, I just need a home."

II

Umugira nyina sengi alisenga. One who doesn't have close relations must combat life alone.

It's not a story Audette Ngoga tells for sympathy. "After my father died during the war," Ngoga says, "my mother settled us into our grandmother's empty home. Then my mother became sick and died. We managed to survive on our own—the house was large, there were banana trees, we could make money making banana beer. We were struggling, but we were surviving."

The fourteen-year-old self-appointed mother of four children holds her three-year-old sister in her arms. The pain in telling her story appears only on a physical level—she has an aching tooth and no money to visit the dentist. Pain on any deeper level is avoided, and when it can't be avoided, it is treated with disgust. Or, perhaps, the pain surfaces in her determination and in her love for her family.

Ngoga explains how she did not know in late 1996 that her uncle was one of the hundreds of thousands of refugees returning to their home from Zaire. She did not know that an adult was approaching, a family member, someone with the potential to advise, to protect, to make life easier.

"When our uncle first saw us in our grandmother's house," Ngoga says, pace quickening, "he chased us out, he ate the chickens we were raising, he stole our hoes, he didn't want anything to do with us. He didn't want to be responsible for us." Ngoga moved her family into the tiny home owned by another relative a few kilometers away.

The two families now total eight and live under one roof, without enough land, without banana trees, without income. The oldest member of the household is twenty-two. "I spoke with the local government official about getting my home back," says Ngoga, "but I was told there was nothing that could be done." Her family now goes some days without food. "The neighbors don't want to lend us money," she says. "They see the NGO cars and they think we get enough assistance." Her uncle does not help either. "My uncle had a house for himself," Ngoga says, "but he wanted a larger one and he owns the land. So now, his other house is empty and we are here—so many people in such a small house."

"I am fourteen years old and I am a child," Ngoga says. "But if I ever get married, I know I will always continue to take care of my children. How could a family abandon its children? To me, a family is a group of people who care for each other when they are hungry or sick. I have a family, I just need a home."

If it is sunrise,
And you don't know the year your parents and sister died, only that it was during war,
And you don't know the current year,
And you have never met your father,
And you never speak to your uncle who lives five houses away,
And you are never helped by your uncle who lives five houses away,
And you are never offered food from your field stolen by your uncle who lives five houses away,
And you never earn more than one dollar each day
Farming, washing, carrying water for neighbors,
And you are never visited by anyone besides three girls your age from church,
And you never remember receiving advice from anyone,
And you never went to school,
And you never want to marry
But you want to have a family,
And you think often of your sister
But never without the beatings,
And you never stay long in your home because yours is the only movement,
And you never think of the future without wondering how you will survive,
And you say
The most difficult thing about your life is
Life itself,
And your name is Claudine Mukamurara,
And you are seventeen years old
And you live alone in Butare, Rwanda,
Then what stirs in you,
And what remains in you,
When you hear the proverb—
We have but one life,
Life flourishes one time, it does not flourish two times,
Amagara yera limwe ntiyera kabili.

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"If we both went to school, who would care for the young ones? . . .There was really no alternative. When an issue like this arises, someone must compromise."

III

Their laughter approaches like wind rustling trees, and Pepertue Nyandwi, eighteen years old, looks troubled. The children's rising voices tell her that school has let out, that her younger siblings—sixteen, eleven, and eight years old—will soon be home for lunch. Nyandwi kneels beside the three-stone foundation of the cooking fire and breathes life into the space below the black kettle. The fire catches and the midday sun illuminates the surrounding smoke. Her face wears the hazed expression of responsibility and age. Nyandwi hears the creak of the gate and knows that the day, but not her work, is half complete.

If it is a good day, Nyandwi hears the voice of her older sister telling her to be courageous, to be patient. On these days, Nyandwi thinks of the past, of the death of her parents during the war, and she feels stronger. "The past is a reality of life," she says, "so I must take life as it comes." If it is a good day, Nyandwi is able to welcome her past as part of her future. If it is a good day, she feels glad to have the opportunity to take care of her sisters and brother.

If it is a bad day, Nyandwi feels overwhelmed by the demands, by her responsibility. "Sometimes I feel that there is no one to take care of my sisters and brother and that is why I do it. I care for them; I find food for them; I find money for school fees; I find clothing; I cultivate the land. I do all this by myself. It has become a much larger problem then I had imagined." It is at these moments, she says, that she feels that she is still a child. "I feel sometimes that there are certain things that an adult knows that are above my thinking."

Nyandwi is the head of her household although her sister is three years older. Once, a choice had to be made. "We discussed the welfare of our life as a family," Nyandwi says, "and we decided to make a compromise. I would stop studying and my sister would continue since she was the better student. If we both went to school, who would care for the young ones?"

Before the war, Nyandwi was training to be a teacher. Now, she watches her siblings return to school and returns to her life of tasks to be completed, of work performed without company. "I might go back to school when my sister finishes," she says. "There was really no alternative. When an issue like this arises, someone must compromise." *It is impossible to keep individually what must be shared, Inyam a y'u ruga bani ntizira imbugita.*

"When my parents died, I ceased to be a child. I had to picture another way of life, I had to take responsibility."

Uburere burata ubuvuke. Education is worth more than birth

"Orphans don't pay school fees," says Ephrem Nyirahabimana, twenty, "but there are residential fees that we have trouble paying." It is early afternoon and Nyirahabimana's anger is mitigated by the softness of his 21-year-old sister Jeanette Musigimana's occasional interjections. The two voices mingle into a single narrative and fill the small living room of their home in Umutare.

"When we can't pay," Nyirahabimana says, "the director sends us out of school. We stay out for about a week, then we come back and beg, we explain we have no money. He insists we should find money without ever suggesting how, but eventually he takes us back." Nyirahabimana explains that this process of expulsion and return is replayed more than ten times a school year, and this is why he and Musigimana are not at school today. "I would like to continue school," Musigimana says, "because the more I can learn in school, the more money I can make to provide for my family in the future." Nyirahabimana, studying languages in secondary school, nods in agreement. "I would like to go to university to be a journalist," he says.

Musigimana and Nyirahabimana's father was a school teacher before the war. Now, all six surviving children attend school. The family works and cultivates only during holidays—they depend on the generosity of neighbors for gifts of food and money. Relying on their neighbors is something to which they've become accustomed. After their parents were killed in a nearby church and the family's house was destroyed during the genocide, their neighbors were the ones who encouraged them to remain in school.

"When we were first alone," Nyirahabimana says, "we all wanted to stop school. But the neighbors who survived the war changed our mind. They gave us moral support; they told us that they understood our situation was difficult, that we were short of food and materials. But if we stopped studying, they told us, we would lose forever the chance to learn." Musigimana adds, "At first we thought the advice was impossible to practice." Nyirahabimana says, "I wanted to challenge the people who killed our parents, to show that even without parents we can survive."

"When my parents died," Musigimana says, "I ceased to be a child. I had to picture another way of life, I had to take responsibility. When you have someone you can depend on, every problem you have is addressed to them. But when you don't have parents, you must face each problem as it comes and you mature. Through this suffering, I became an adult."

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IV

"I am not part of a family. A family has parents."

Emmanuel Rutinga is seventeen years old, lives in Kigali, and he is talking about the murder of his parents. He says he does not know who killed his parents and left them on the side of the road near his house. He also does not know whether the killers have returned to his neighborhood. Rutinga lives with his family in their parents' cement-covered house in a rural area outside of Kigali. "There aren't a lot of bad people in the neighborhood," he says. "Most of these people are in jail . . . but there are others who are still free." Rutinga has witnessed people return to his community from the camps in Zaire and Tanzania during the last five months and has seen some of them asking families of victims for forgiveness. "I can not give pardon," he says. "It is Christian to pardon and I am Christian, but . . ." In a calm, flat voice, Rutinga explains that no one in the family is scared of the people who have returned. "No one is scared," he says, "not even at night."

"I am too young to be a mother, but I am a mother and I would never leave my brother and sister alone."

Solange Ingabire is fifteen years old, lives in Byumba, and is talking about how she became lost among the half-million refugees returning to Rwanda. "I never felt more lonely in my life than when I came home from eastern Zaire," she says. When Ingabire and her two siblings watched everyone in their refugee camp begin to return to Rwanda, their decision was, for the most part, made for them. Their mother had died in July, 1994, in the camp and was no longer alive to guide their decision and their path as when they initially fled. "This time it was a family decision," Ingabire says. "Everyone agreed to return." She explains how one thought was on her mind as she headed toward Byumba. "My parents had died," she says. "At least we could return to our country." Ingabire says that she does not believe she is strong. "Someone is strong," she says, "if they can do everything. I don't know anyone like that."

"We are a family, but not with the same force as before the war."

Dative Niyonsaba is eighteen years old, lives in Nyamata, and she is remembering what it means to sleep in fear. "We were never attacked, but there was always a fear of the darkness, a permanent fear." Niyonsaba's parents were killed during the genocide and she and her remaining family hid in a swamp near their home for three months, leaving only to scatch for food. When it became safe enough for them to return to their house, the fear remained. "At that house, we were isolated. We were always afraid of thieves and of other people doing us harm." Niyonsaba and her family now live in a newly-constructed house in a village of thirty homes designated for survivors of the genocide. "Now we live with other people," Niyonsaba says. "We're very happy to live here. There's not a lot of sadness, and no fear during the night." Their new house, unlike the others in this area of Rwanda, are part of a neighborhood, sharing a common road and facing each other. Niyonsaba explains how she is not sure whether or not she owns this new house. She also explains how life in the village is not a private life. "All the neighbors know what's going on," she says. "And if you don't have food one day, everyone knows." However, Niyonsaba believes that the security offered by the village is worth the sacrifice of privacy. "The village doesn't destroy the family," she says. "It opens the family to other families."

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Genocide and war have forever altered the lives of these families. They are families of children who have no guarantees about the security of their housing, their land, their food supply, or their education. What lies ahead for these families as they attempt to find their place within communities which are, in turn, redefining themselves?

What does community mean in Rwanda after the genocide?* Is community a newly-constructed village in Nyamata that offers protection but infringes on family privacy? Is community a hillside in Byumba of tree stumps, tents, and makeshift houses for repatriated refugees? Or is community what surrounds a family in Kigali who have lived where they always have, but who are now unsure if their parents' murderers walk by their home on the way to market?

As much as these families of children must rely on their communities, their communities will someday rely upon them. If their communities, however, do not find a way to embrace these children, will future communities be nothing more than individual homes sheltering an invisible world of children? Homes may offer privacy, stability, and protection to families, but they provide very little structure for communities. Communities begin with children.

*This question was posed by Dr. Leila Gupta, UNICEF-Rwanda, for a conference on community based follow-up in Kigali, September, 1996.

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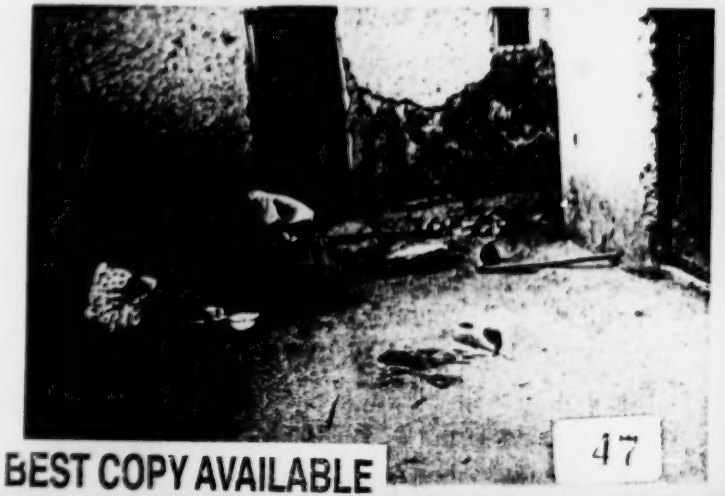
The following children participated in this project:

Gasengayire, Nzayisenga, Mukankuranga, Nyiramugwera, Nikuze, Uwamahoro, Ndayivagiye, Ingabire, Murebwayire, Umuhoza, Mukarusengo, Rutinga, Mukuralinda, Nyandwi, Mukabalisa, Kayiranga, Nushmor, Bayisenge, Ngoga, Mukamana, Uwamahoro, Musengiman, Uwimana, Bizumuremyi, Mukuralinda, Mukarwaka, Mukarutabana, Uwantege Nyinawankusi, Yamukuyiye, Nyirahabimana, Kamugisha, Musabyemaliya, Niyonsaba, Mukandoli, Ntirimeninda, Muukiyehe, Niyungabo, Karake, Uwiragiye, Ndayambaje, Majyamebere, Maribori, Uwamahoro, Nurorgurinkuku, Mukakimenyi, Ntaganda, Mukagakwaya, Cyanzayire, Nsabiman, Mureramanzi, Mukamurara, Murenzi, Ntaganda, Umutesi, Murabutare, Kamilindi, Kantetere, Habanabakize, Ntawukabura, Mushimiyimana, Muka mukenga, Nyiransabimana, Nyinawinjyeri, Mukamusoni, Mukuralinda, Ndagijimana, Musabyimana, Kizayire, Kayitesi, Mukagatete, Ayinkamiye, Kamarande, Nsengimana, Muyizere, Barakamfitiye, Mukasekuru, Narame, Nsabimana, Musengimana, Nzeyimana, Uwamaliya, Nyampinga, Dushimiyimana, Ndagigimana, Niyibaho, Nizeyimana, Gakimbiri, Bonfils, Kubwimana, Uwamurera, Turatsinze, Idwizera, Kamanyana, Bizimana, Nyandwi, Akingeneye, Mfizi, Kabanyana, Niyibizi, Uwizeyimana, Ndagijimana, Uwambayikirezi, Mukawera, Uwitonze, Mukeshimana, Nsengiyumva, Uwanyagasani, Musabyemariya, Ntabareshya, Niyonsaba, Niyomugabo, Ntakirutimana, Bihoviki, Mukabagabo, Turatisinze, Mukakalisa, Ugirumurera.

These photographs were made by one family of children living alone outside of Kigali.



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Noah Hendler and Craig Cohen use photography and writing to help influence policies affecting the lives of those living in marginalized communities.
For further information about "No Home Without Foundation" or other documentary projects, please contact Noah Hendler or Craig Cohen by e-mail at: noahemail@aol.com, or visit the website for this project at www.africanews.com.
For further information about the Hart Leadership Program and its GLASI program (Global Leadership and Service Initiative), please contact Dr. Robert Korstad or Dr. J. Kirk Felsman at 919.613.7350.

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